

May 2015 extended essay reports

Philosophy

Overall grade boundaries

Grade:	E	D	C	B	A
Mark range:	0-7	8-15	16-22	23-28	29-36

The range and suitability of the work submitted

The submitted essays varied with regard to the achievement levels attained. The stronger essays had a clear, well-focused, and sufficiently narrow research question; the question was researched using a solid reference bank comprising relevant primary and secondary sources, which were integrated thoughtfully and carefully to support the developing argument; displaying an effective use of philosophical terminology, clarity, and conciseness of expression. The best essays were logically structured, with an analytically clear and coherent flow of ideas, conceptual distinctness, and an effective and sophisticated application of evaluative skills which were conducive to the development of a well-reasoned and cogent argument. The weaker essays were mostly narrative and descriptive in their approach; many times they merely listed, in a perfunctory manner and with a limited clarity, series of opinions collected from secondary sources. There were many excellent essays, just to mention one: "To what extent does Leibniz's version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason pose a challenge to our conception of moral responsibility?".

Candidate performance against each criterion

Criterion A: research question

Many or most research questions were adequate, but there is a tendency to express the research questions in a broad/general way. This limits the number of marks that can be awarded.

Criterion B: introduction

Generally this area was addressed but sometimes not titled. Many candidates found difficulties performing satisfactorily against this criterion. A common flaw when addressing the introduction is to repeat either literally or with some minor variations the content of the abstract. Some introductions presented a very vague context (very often without an effective

use of existing knowledge and sources), and/or an extremely brief treatment of the significance of the topic, which cannot be considered an effective demonstration. The well-focused and richly researched essays had a clear and effective introduction. The introduction needs to clearly delineate the philosophical context of investigation and demonstrate the philosophical significance of the topic, while remaining focused on the argument that is going to be developed.

Criterion C: investigation

All essays submitted showed at least some planning, however the weaker ones relied almost exclusively on secondary source material, and were largely descriptive or narrative without a clear coherence of thought or a well-defined focus and direction for the development of the argument. In general a great number of the candidates tend to only use second hand information. This is not methodologically accurate; it usually leads to a descriptive approach to the subject.

Criterion D: knowledge and understanding of the topic studied

The stronger essays demonstrated an in-depth and insightful elaboration and analysis of the identified philosophical issue(s), whereas in the weaker ones, the approach was superficial with little genuine awareness or understanding of the relevant philosophical ideas/concepts/arguments. Further, the stronger essays had a good critical understanding of how to apply their knowledge. The knowledge of philosophical theories and authors, in general, was based on secondary sources, instead of a careful reading of philosophical texts.

Criterion E: reasoned argument

In the stronger essays, the argument was well-structured (coherent and consistent), with a clear and progressive line of development resulting in a well-nuanced and convincing conclusion. In the weaker essays, the argument was either conceptually unclear or philosophically irrelevant, or it lacked any serious academic underpinning, or the main points were not sufficiently justified.

Criterion F: application of analytical and evaluative skills

The stronger essays demonstrated an effective application of philosophical analysis and evaluation of arguments and counter-arguments, whereas the weaker ones either lacked analytical, conceptual, and terminological clarity, or merely reiterated and recounted the insufficiently understood points from secondary source material. Most of the essays illustrated positions with supporting examples. However, only the best essays put forward possible counter-arguments and proposed strategies to overcome them. Some mediocre essays offered a mere statement of personal opinion as evaluation. Good essays briefly set up the question and quickly move to dealing with interpretation, clarification, critique and evaluation: weaker essays do not go beyond exposition.

Criterion G: use of language appropriate to the subject:

Whereas the effective use of subject-specific terminology was evident in the stronger essays, the weaker ones usually lacked clarity of expression or proper understanding of philosophical terminology. Some candidates used philosophical language, especially relating to epistemology, metaethics and continental theory with skill and confidence, whereas others would take a topic which really requires technical vocabulary, and use no technical language at all.

Criterion H: conclusion

In nearly all essays a conclusion was attempted; in the stronger ones, the conclusion was consistent with the argument presented and provided an evaluation in light of the discussion; whereas in the weaker ones, the conclusion was but a reiteration of the aims of the investigation, a descriptive or repetitive summary of the discussion, or an incoherent declaration of unsupported personal opinions. The conclusions must not be definitive, that it is not necessary for them to say the last word on the topic chosen, but to establish some points in relation to the previous discussion.

Criterion I: formal presentation

In general satisfactory performance at least was achieved by most candidates. The most common formal defects of the essays are the same as in previous sessions: a) missing references to the sources through the essay; vague references; a works cited list including materials of which there is no explicit trace through the essay.

Criterion J: abstract

Examiners noticed a significant improvement in this sessions' EE. The best essays clearly and concisely presented the three elements required of an abstract, whereas the weaker ones were usually deficient in explaining how the investigation was undertaken or the way in which the argument was structured.

Criterion K: holistic judgement

Most essays showed at least some personal engagement and reflection, but the weaker ones had clear shortcomings in terms of depth of understanding or intellectual initiative. Many candidates clearly showed a passion for their chosen topic, even if they had struggled with the investigation. When examiners mark this criterion they do take into consideration what the supervisor has written – the meeting of deadlines, the willingness to take advice etc. In many cases supervisors made no comment (especially if the hours used for consultation was zero or one hour).

Recommendations for the supervision of future candidates

The criteria and their interpretation for philosophy as presented in the EE guide have to be not only read, but employed as a guide throughout the whole process of researching and writing. Here are some suggestions for improvement:

- It would help if the research question is always clearly identified. Candidates should also try and break down their text with subtitles that indicate how the argument is developing, recalling that the argument is an answer to a specific philosophical problem presented in the research question.
- Introduction: avoid the repetition of portions or the totality of the contents included in the abstract. Ensure that candidates are using existing knowledge on the topic chosen and that they are referencing that knowledge properly.
- Investigation: emphasize the priority of primary sources for a good investigation. It is preferable that an essay is developed through an effective use and understanding of a small number of appropriate primary sources than an essay developed through the use of a great amount of secondary sources which could be inaccurate.
- Perhaps supervisors could focus on the importance of studying philosophical texts (or at least chapters and quotations) first-hand. Reading and commenting on philosophical texts in the classroom could provide the appropriate methodology for the deep philosophical analysis of texts, while at the same time awakening critical thought.
- Perhaps at some point in the research process, candidates should work with the parts of the essay separately, with the guidance of the criteria, that is to say, work with the introduction, abstract, conclusion developing an awareness of their own argument while constructing these building-blocks of the task as required. The end product should however be an integrated investigation.
- Emphasize the importance of offering a personal voice on the topic studied. Candidates should ask what they think about the research question and should not hesitate to express their position. A good way to find reasons that support their personal opinion is to face possible counter-arguments, trying to analyse and overcome them.
- Formal presentation: examiners suggest the fulfillment of three commonsense criteria:
 - 1. When writing about a philosopher or imputing positions and arguments of philosophers, you must provide precise references including page numbers so the reader knows where exactly you read this.
 - 2. When using internet sources provide valid URLs so the reader can read the material as well, if they so wish.
 - 3. Do not use secondary material from the internet with no author, and that are of a questionable nature.